

For a health-promoting, inclusive and complex vision

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Dear Editors,

It's not easy to comment on the recurrence of World Health Day when, this year, it comes at a time of the spreading of the Covid-19 pandemic, causing the death of increasing numbers of people all over the world. The fact that several months have passed since the virus first emerged, might lead us to think that political decisions in combination with the work of our healthcare systems would have been able to limit its impact. However, the infection seems to be able to bypass many people's immune systems in an irreversible way and to propagate its effects even beyond our worst predictions.

In the face of such trying times, in his epic theatre dramas (e.g. *Mother courage and her children*, and *The good woman of Setzuan*), Bertolt Brecht asked whether silence might be the best response, since it may be more dignified to avert our gaze from the sufferers if we are unable to go beyond social constraints to provide proper succour for their plight. If not, then we are at risk of being of very little help, becoming mere accountants of the bankruptcy of modern illusions. Conversely, in situations of need, Danilo Dolci exhorted those that could do

so to “act quickly (and well) because people are dying”, a phrase that echoes in the title of his book *Fate presto (e bene) perché si muore*. For this reason, we are compelled to reflect on the effects of this pandemic with as deep a perspective as possible, putting key issues such as prevention and solidarity, and even hope, at the centre of public discourse.

The current crisis lays bare many of the contradictions of our times, starting from the illusion that our collective and personal health is largely protected against the “ills of nature” by the health and welfare systems, an idea upon which our modern states were founded and are still based. Bio-politics – i.e. the increasing concern with the biological wellbeing of the population, including disease control and prevention described by M. Foucault in *The Birth of Biopolitics* is a statutory element of every model, whether in democratic or dictatorial states. The success or failure of welfare agencies based on global and local healthcare systems in the face of the contagion is now a central issue that sets a clear demarcations amongst different views of the future.

If – as it seems – we are dealing with failure, then a number of the apparent certainties of

modernity are collapsing, despite the fact that we have come to take them for granted. The “diseases of progress” – the degenerative pathologies (tumoral, neurological, dysfunctional) spread by environmental degradation, but not transmissible from human being to human being – have been ostensibly accepted, as long as the systems causing them would seemingly grant us defence against the “transmissible diseases”, amongst which epidemics. Over the centuries, epidemics such as the plague, the typhoid fever etc. decimated humanity on several occasions, until they finally appeared to have been relegated to the margins of history – or so we believed. But our illnesses are indeed directly correlated with socio-economic models. Even the birth of agriculture 10 thousand years ago introduced problems unknown before the Neolithic age, due to nutritional deficiencies derived from a reduction of dietary choices and the rise of zoonosis by animal breeding.

We do not yet have definite confirmation, but if hypotheses concerning the insurgence of the new coronavirus as related to deforestation, biodiversity loss, the reduction of the biosphere are confirmed, – together with air deterioration due to industrialization and atmospheric pollution (which characterized most of the early hotbeds of infections) – then we are looking at something new which goes beyond conventional ideas of pandemics. A synergy which was never observed before, through the integration of “the diseases of progress” with the “transmissible diseases”, raising the risk of rendering both increasingly devastating, if we are unable to revert the course of current development models.

In all cases, we must necessarily reconsider many of our priorities – rights or profit, equality or privilege, politics or greed – bearing in mind the need to define and maintain a coherent position. We can try to strengthen our defence against pandemics, leaving everything else unchanged,

yet this will inevitably make the fortresses of the rich impenetrable and endowed with all-powerful sanitary and control structures which are only available to their inhabitants. Otherwise, we can act so as to endeavour to prevent the danger of pandemics at their poverty-steeped roots. We can try, for example, to reduce the risk of virus spillover from other species to humans by ensuring hygiene, medicine, water, and food in every inhabited area, and ceasing to exploit terrestrial and marine habitats beyond sustainability. Also, we could contain the spread of the infection by curbing immoderate trafficking and trading, reconsidering urbanization, and providing shelter to the masses in exodus as long as we fail in thwarting war and misery.

Moreover, we must recognize that placing faith in technology to protect us is inadequate. Even if equality of access to, and competence in the infosphere were a reality, the option to rely on ICT devices for human relationships and sustenance in times of crisis is not a rational choice. Firstly, because this would be an unsustainable dependence on the very technology that lies at the heart of the reciprocal strengthening of transmissible and non-transmissible diseases favoured by environmental deterioration. Secondly, because it reduces relations to a surrogate form, that can work only within nihilist and auto-consolatory perspectives such as those proposed some 40 years ago by J.G. Ballard in *Myths of the next future*. As the social distancing rules now globally adopted show, the social control we adapt to, necessarily, even if reluctantly, requires efforts to homologate behaviour and thoughts according to the dictates of virtual and mechanical expedients; this is a situation which is not sustainable for everybody and one which in the longer term would lead human societies on a trajectory that goes in the opposite direction from that of creating stronger and resilient communities and individuals.

The overturning of priorities and perspectives this crisis must necessarily provoke, clearly illustrates the untenable paradox of a system that holds financial markets, weaponry and infrastructural projects to be the key, accepted priorities while considering health agencies, human relations and solidarity as dispensable or superfluous. In the name of “deregulation” and “liberalization”, immoral and inefficient rules have been introduced, not to simplify trade and jobs or increase their freedom, but to make them succumb to the unpredictable and eventually disastrous laws of one given economic doctrine. If such ultimately illiberal and ill-causing courses of action had not been embarked on, fatal dysfunctions such as the lack of protective clothing and facemasks all over Europe would have been avoided, since with just rewards within an equitable labour market we would have not lost the capability of producing them. In Italy the paucity of medical supplies in the very same territories where the disproportionately costly military aircraft taking off every day are well stocked with them, has led to dozens of citizens of the richest Italian regions being moved to intensive care units in Germany.

The constant refusal to recognize civil and human rights to cohorts of immigrants has led them to abandon the fields of a country unable to protect its foreign workers with basic health and housing needs, leaving Italy more miserable, undefended and alone.

Many predict or hope for a quick return to the illusion of normality in place before the crisis, while others consider it impossible. Whatever happens, it will not be possible to look at the coming reality with the same illusions and prejudices we have harboured for so long. These have been so deeply rooted in our minds as to prevent us from realizing the significance of what was there before our very eyes, acted out on the screens of our smart devices: the distant images and messages of Chinese people afflicted by contagion, their stores closed and their lives disrupted, and no true care on our part to listen, understand and learn before it was too late.